A Twentieth-Century Dream with a Twenty-First-Century Outlook: Yashiro Yukio, a Japanese Historian of Western Art, and His Conception of Institutions for the Study of East Asian Art

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This essay addresses the Japanese art historian Yashiro Yukio (1890–1975) (fig. 1), his scholarship, and the two institutions that he founded for the study of East Asian art. Yashiro lived from the first quarter through the third quarter of the twentieth century, with World War II falling at the exact midpoint of his life. Prior to the war, in 1930, he founded the Institute of Art Research (*Bijutsu Kenkyujyo*; today the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo); immediately following the war, in 1946, he began to collect objects for the Museum Yamato Bunkakan, which opened in 1960. Reflecting the insights of their founder, whose internationalism makes him stand out among the Japanese art historians of his generation, these distinctive institutions can be seen as the realization of his twentieth-century dream for the study of East Asian art in Japan.

Fig. 1. Yashiro Yukio, c. 1965. From *Bi no tayori* [Newsletter of the Yamato Bunkakan] (1975): 33

In commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of Yashiro's death, the Museum Yamato Bunkakan, where I was employed as a curator until fall 2005, organized an exhibition in the spring of 2005 that focused on his collection. Working on this exhibition gave me the opportunity to consider how we might go about carrying Yashiro's twentieth-century dreams forward into the twenty-first century. The Japanese economy changed significantly during the last decade of the twentieth century, with the bursting of the so-called economic bubble. The subsequent focus on the pursuit of economic rationality has shaken the foundations of art museums and research institutions, which were not created as profit-making enterprises. The institutions that Yashiro founded, too, have recently been forced to undergo structural changes and budget cuts as a result of the current situation. Here, by going back to reflect upon Yashiro's distinctive life and academic path, I would like to consider how we might connect his twentieth-century dreams to our own objectives in the twenty-first century and more fully realize their potential.

The Life of Yashiro Yukio

Yashiro Yukio's life was considerably more international than the lives of his Japanese contemporaries in the field of art history.[1] He was born and raised in Yokohama, Japan's largest international port of trade. From the late nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, Yokohama was a bustling hub of the raw silk trade and home to many foreigners. Yashiro began studying English as a child, and unlike other Japanese he felt little sense of unfamiliarity toward foreigners. While he majored in English literature at the University of Tokyo, he was also an avid painter during his student days, and following his graduation in 1915 he became an assistant professor of Western art history at the Tokyo Fine Arts School. At the time, the art history departments of the University of Tokyo (then called Tokyo Imperial University) and the Tokyo Fine Arts School were not on good terms, and Yashiro would find himself excluded from the academic world of art history, which centered around the University of Tokyo, for the rest of his life. The antagonism between the art history departments of the two institutions seems to have originated in a conflict of pride: the University of Tokyo saw itself as representing the pinnacle of the Japanese academic world, while the Tokyo Fine Arts School considered itself to represent the pinnacle of art education in Japan. But since the Tokyo Fine Arts School was primarily devoted to artistic practice and was not engaged in training researchers, Yashiro was unable to produce any successors in the study of art history at the school.

In 1916 Yashiro was blessed with an extraordinary opportunity to become familiar with the best collection of East Asian art in Japan. As an interpreter for the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), he spent a summer with Hara Sankei (1868–1939; also known as Hara Tomitarō), who had made his fortune in the silk trade and built a lavish villa in the suburbs of Yokohama. In addition to collecting examples of premodern East Asian art, Hara was also known as a major patron of such contemporary painters as Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958), Shimomura Kanzan (1873–1930), and Hayami Gyoshū (1894–1935), whose works have come to represent Japanese-style painting, or *Nihonga*, in the modern period. Yashiro continued to frequent Hara's artistic salon after Tagore returned to India, gaining the opportunity to appreciate the finest works of East Asian art in the country. He became a full professor at the Tokyo Fine Arts School in 1917, and in 1921 he was finally able to realize his fervent wish of traveling to Europe for study. He began in London and then moved on to Florence, where he immersed himself in the study of Renaissance painting under Bernard Berenson. In 1925 he presented the results of his research in

Sandro Botticelli, a book published by the Medici Society of London. This was a lavish publication in three volumes, filled with photographic details that were something of a rarity at the time. Regardless of the fact that the book was authored by an Asian, it was very well received as a scholarly publication in Europe and America. But when Yashiro returned to Japan, his work faced a very chilly reception by those at the University of Tokyo and in the field of art history over which it held dominance. Presumably these scholars, who were widely expected to be leaders in their field, were envious of Yashiro's success and uncomfortable with the idea that the work of a Tokyo Fine Arts School professor should have been the first Japanese art historical work to achieve international recognition. In any case, a large new project was awaiting Yashiro upon his return: namely, the founding of an art research institute.

The Concept and Foundation of the Institute of Art Research

The oil painter Kuroda Seiki (1866–1924), who led the practice of Western painting in Japan during the Meiji and Taishō periods, died in 1924. In his will he left a portion of his estate to the government, designating that it be used to found an institute for the research of the fine arts of Japan. When Yashiro was consulted about the project, he developed a plan for a research institute dedicated to the arts of Japan and East Asia that would be based on the photographic archive of artworks that he had observed during his period of study in London. Yashiro's plan was accepted. The Institute of Art Research opened in 1930, and Yashiro became its director in 1936. The institute was extremely active in its early years, working energetically to form its photographic collection of the arts of Asia and founding the research journal *Bijutsu kenkyū* (Journal of Art Studies) among other activities. During this period Yashiro made frequent visits to China, where he investigated the art, antiquities, and historical sites of each region. His research focus also began to shift from the arts of the West to those of East Asia, for he began to realize that his ability to conduct research on the West would be limited so long as he was bound to stay in Japan. Yashiro recounted that he gave serious thought to the idea of moving to Europe, but that plan was never realized. Having experienced just once, in Italy, the joys of conducting research in close proximity to the artworks and amongst plentiful documentary sources, he instead resolved to direct his energies toward founding a research institute that would create a comparable environment in Japan.

In 1942, in the midst of World War II, Yashiro resigned his post as director of the Institute of Art Research, facing opposition from within the organization for his perceived sympathies toward America and England. He also resigned as pro-

fessor at the Tokyo Fine Arts School at this time, with the result that he became largely isolated from the academic community.

Yashiro's chance to resume his activities in the public eye came in 1945, following Japan's defeat in the war. As a member of the newly founded Committee for the Preservation of Cultural Properties under the Ministry of Education, he became involved in administrative work. Among the projects in which he had a role was the 1953 traveling exhibition of premodern Japanese art organized by the committee. As a commemoration of Japan's return to the international community following the war, it was shown at four venues: the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Seattle Art Museum. Yashiro, who had many friends in America, must have been very pleased to take part in an exhibition that symbolized the end of hostilities between Japan and the United States.

The Concept Behind the Museum Yamato Bunkakan

Japan's defeat in the war, the subsequent Allied occupation, and the dissolution of the peerage and of the *zaibatsu* conglomerates brought enormous changes to the system of the fine arts in Japan. This also led to a new opportunity for Yashiro, who had been forced out of the Institute of Art Research during the war. This was the founding of the Museum Yamato Bunkakan.

The main impetus behind the founding of the Museum Yamato Bunkakan came from the Kinki Nippon Railway, also known as Kintetsu, the largest private railway company in Japan, which connects Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, and Ise, all vital centers of Japanese history and culture. During the war, the railway's president, Oita Torao (1884–1948), conceived a plan to bring an awareness of Japanese culture to the people living along his railway lines, and he frequently consulted Yashiro about it. Yashiro recommended the founding of a museum that would center around the arts of Japan and East Asia, and in 1946, just following the war, the Museum Yamato Bunkakan was established as a private foundation. There appears to have been significant opposition from within Kintetsu to the founding of an art museum during a period when people were struggling just to eat and had no time to think about art and culture. But at the same time, we can admire Yashiro and Oita's clarity of foresight in being committed to the project and making it happen, for in the midst of the economic confusion following the war, previously unknown art treasures flooded the market and were available at prices that would be unthinkable today.

The construction of a museum building was postponed, and Kintetsu gave Yashiro complete authority over the more immediate project of assembling artworks for the collection. He thus began to pour his energies into the acquisition of famous works. The pieces he acquired at this time strongly reflect his individual philosophy, for unlike the major Japanese collectors of the prewar period, who chose objects for their personal use in Japanese tea ceremonies, Yashiro was assembling a modern collection that was intended for museum display from the very start. It is also worth bearing in mind that Yashiro was not a man of wealth but rather an art historian, and he acquired art as the representative of a private company whose goal was to contribute to social enrichment. This aspect of the project can also be said to symbolize the situation in postwar Japan.

Yashiro's many years of experience with American and European art museums naturally informed his collecting policies. His background at the Institute of Art Research is also perceptible in the clearly research-orientated course that he set out for the Museum Yamato Bunkakan, and he founded the academic journal *Yamato Bunka* immediately following its establishment.

The core collection of the current Museum Yamato Bunkakan was thus formed in the chaotic period following the end of the war. At the time, Hara Sankei's collection was also on the verge of being broken up and dispersed, and Yashiro acquired many fine pieces from it. As examples of the collection from this time, I would like to introduce four works that have been registered as Japanese National Treasures:

(1) *Illuminated Scroll of the Lotus Sutra*
This decorated sutra was produced in the twelfth century, when the *Lotus Sutra* was an object of profound faith among Japanese aristocrats, who adorned it with gold and silver. The frontispiece painting depicts a ritual in which such a sutra would be used. This work is from the former Hara collection.

(2) *Scroll of the Nezame Tale*
This well-known twelfth-century picture hand scroll is often cited in conjunction with the renowned *Tale of Genji* hand scroll. It was also from the collection of Hara Sankei.

(3) *Leading a Buffalo Homeward in the Snow*, by the Chinese artist Li Di (Southern Song dynasty)

This twelfth-century work was from the collection of Masuda Don'o (1848–1938; also known as Masuda Takashi), the top executive of the Mitsui *zaibatsu*.

(4) The *Matsuura Screen*

This screen (fig. 2) is thought to have been produced during the first half of the seventeenth century and depicts women of the pleasure quarters. The women are painted almost life-size, and though the colors and patterns are festive, a sense of sadness also pervades the work. It aptly reflects Yashiro's own tastes as a scholar of Botticelli. The screen is named for its reputed former owners, the Matsuura family, daimyō of Hiroda Kyūshū area, during the seventeenth to nineteenth century.

Fig. 2. *Matsuura Screen*, Edo period, 17th century. Pair of six-fold screens, color on gold-leafed paper; each 5 ft. 13/16 in. x 11 ft. 10 3/8 in. (154.5 x 361.7 cm). The Museum Yamato Bunkakan, Nara, Japan

After a long preparation period of fifteen years, the Museum Yamato Bunkakan (fig. 3) was constructed in 1960 in a suburb of Nara, Japan's ancient capital, and Yashiro was appointed its first director. The grounds occupy about ten acres facing a pond and commanding a fine view of the surrounding area. The site's natural incline, dotted with pine trees, was kept in place. Yashiro maintained that the museum should be a space that harmonizes natural and man-made beauty, and he worked with the architect Yoshida Isoya (1894–1974) to develop a distinctive plan for the site. While the museum building is a modern structure of reinforced con-

Fig. 3. Main building of the Museum Yamato Bunkakan, 1960

crete, the exterior incorporates elements of early modern castle and traditional storehouse design, thus befitting a place for the exhibition of Japanese and East Asian art. The extensive grounds, planted with trees, flowers, and shrubs of the four seasons, were intended to transport viewers away from the bustle of city life into an otherworldly atmosphere prior to their encounter with the artworks. The bamboo grove in the courtyard at the museum's center symbolizes Yashiro's philosophy with respect to art museums: the natural setting that surrounds the museum enters into the exhibition space, creating a serene atmosphere in which to appreciate the art. From the gallery's terrace one can look out upon the mountains of Nara, the residence of the gods of ancient Japan, and realize that one is occupying a historic locale. Recently I visited the site of Hara Sankei's villa for the first time, which is now a Yokohama city public park called Sankei-en. I was surprised to find that the atmosphere of the place was very similar to that of the Museum Yamato Bunkakan, and now wonder if it might have been the basis for Yashiro's conceptualization of the new museum. It is truly moving to realize that just fifteen years after the end of the war, Oita and Yashiro devoted their energies to re-creating

the famous collector Hara Sankei's ideal approach to art appreciation, namely the harmonization of natural surroundings and works of art.

The Museum Yamato Bunkakan Today

Next I would like to discuss the state of the Museum Yamato Bunkakan today. The museum currently arranges eight exhibitions per year: seven thematic exhibitions of works from the museum collection and one large-scale special exhibition in the autumn. It could be said that the Yamato Bunkakan's emphasis on regular exhibitions of works from its own collection represents an important stance within Japan's current-day museum culture, where numerous large-scale special exhibitions are organized with the aim of attracting visitors. The special exhibitions at the Yamato Bunkakan are highly regarded as pioneering explorations of the latest themes in Japanese and East Asian art historical scholarship.

But the economic depression that hit Japan in the 1990s has had a serious impact on the operation of art museums, especially those that function as cultural enterprises within private companies. The museum's parent company, Kintetsu, has also fallen into a depression, and last year retired from its long-term sponsorship of the professional baseball team that had been the the main pillar of its cultural activities for many years. The financial situation of the company has also had a serious impact on the museum, which has been unable to purchase any objects for the past ten years, thus breaking with its fifty-year history of acquisitions that began in 1946. Yashiro considered the periodic acquisition of works of art to be one of the most important aspects of maintaining the vitality of the museum; in his writing he compared a museum that had stopped collecting artworks to a stream that had ceased to flow, resulting in a stagnant pool. Now that Japan's economy has finally begun to pick up again, it should be a priority that the Yamato Bunkakan once again live up to his standards for the ideal museum.

Yashiro's Scholarship and the Possibility for an International Vision Incorporating the West, East Asia, and Japan

Toward the end of his life, Yashiro strove to expand research in the arts of East Asia, and especially to make this research accessible to the general public. This stance can be said to underlie both his prewar work in founding an art research institute for scholars and his postwar work in founding a museum for art lovers among the general public.

His 1965 publication, *Nihon bijutsu no tokushitsu* (Characteristics of

Japanese Art),[2] brings together the experiences from his days as a young scholar of Western art history, his rich experiences abroad in the era between the two wars, the understanding of artworks themselves based on the close observation that underlay his foundation of a research institute and collecting for the museum, and his perspectives on cultural administration and preservation. It overflows with a wide range of perspectives and suggestions in a manner that would be unthinkable for a current-day scholar of art history in Japan. A similarly international perspective can be seen in the person of Okakura Tenshin (1863–1913; also known as Okakura Kakuzō), the founder of the Tokyo Fine Arts School who was also employed as the curator of the Chinese and Japanese collections at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and who actively worked to introduce the arts of East Asia to audiences in the United States and Europe. Yashiro never met Okakura, but it seems that he was deeply conscious of the older scholar, who was also born and raised in the international port city of Yokohama, learned English, and graduated from the University of Tokyo.

Lastly, I would like to identify three of Yashiro's important contributions or legacies. First, his vision was far more international than any of the other art history scholars of his generation; he learned his art historical methodology within the heart of the field of Western art history in the first part of the twentieth century. That this international figure experienced a kind of return to the arts of Japan and East Asia in the latter part of his life is what gives the Museum Yamato Bunkakan its special character and links it closely with the background of its founder. This state of affairs can be of use to us as we consider the potential of Asian art history in the twenty-first century. Yashiro's international vision, which combined a flexible sensibility with a sharp grasp of the circumstances of his own time, enabled him to avoid the common tendency of scholars to remain fixed in their own specialization.

Second, Yashiro was perhaps the only Japanese art historian of his day who was afforded the opportunity to build a collection and establish an art museum on the basis of his connoisseurial eye. His encounter with Oita of Kintetsu, who had a deep understanding of the importance of constructing an art museum, and the state of economic confusion after the war are the factors that enabled Yashiro to form a high-quality museum collection on a scale that would be virtually impossible today.

Third—and this is surprisingly crucial—Yashiro, who had been excluded from the academic world of the university art history department, was able to encourage a large number of the next generation's researchers through his founding

of what is today the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo, and the Museum Yamato Bunkakan. The scholars of East Asian art history who were able to work at these institutions in their twenties and thirties have gone on to become university professors throughout Japan, where they are currently fostering the next generation of scholars. This situation is not unrelated to Yashiro's own experiences studying the great art of Asia and the West in two ideal environments: in the Yokohama salon of Hara Sankei and under Bernard Berenson in Florence. The Tokyo Research Institute for Cultural Properties and the Yamato Bunkakan are said to be two of the most sympathetic environments in which to train young scholars because of the freedom and flexibility they afford them in their work. In this sense it could be said that Yashiro's greatest legacy is not in systems or institutions or facilities such as museums and research institutes, but rather in his vision of what makes an ideal research environment itself.

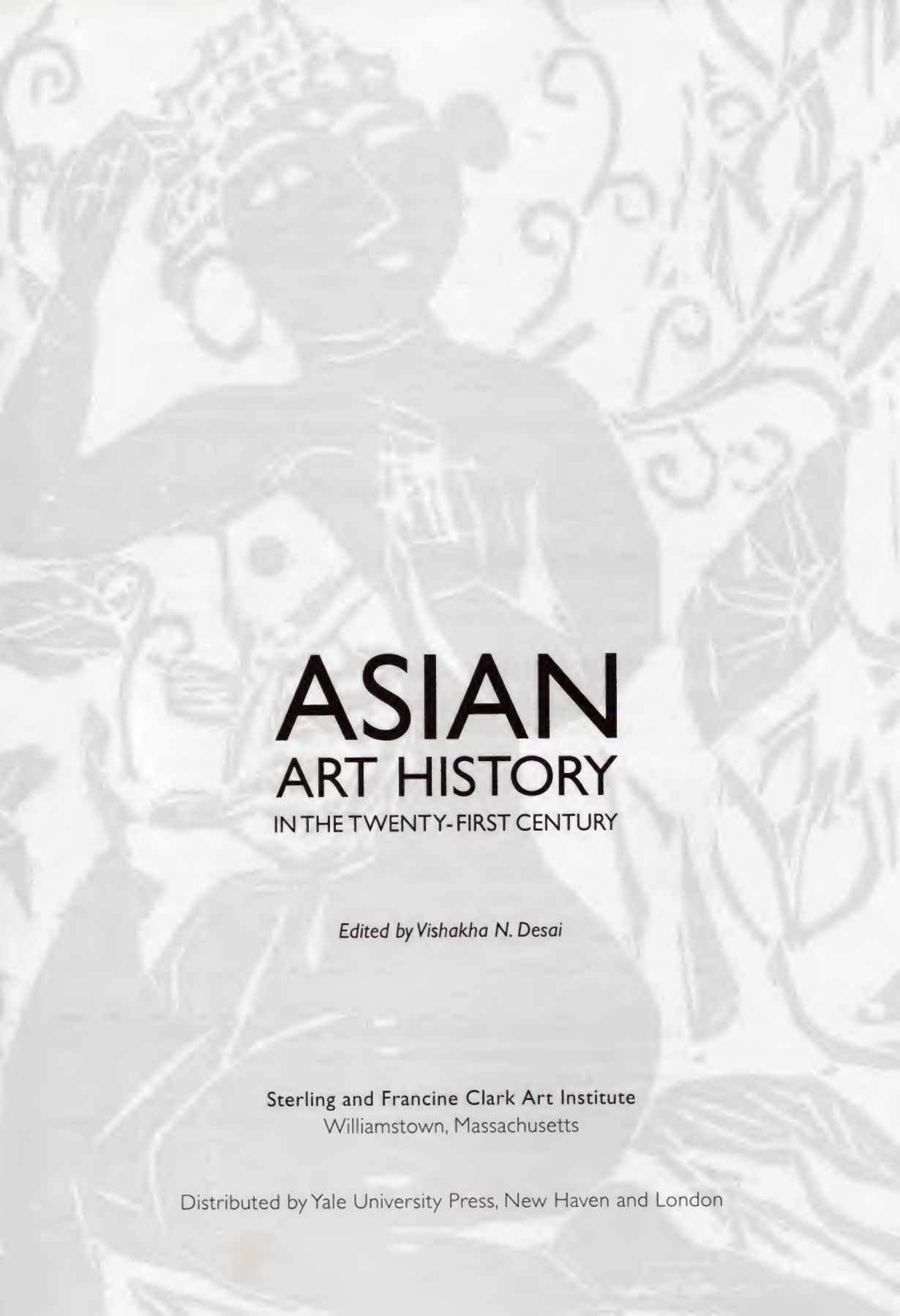
I would like to urge all of you to visit the Museum Yamato Bunkakan on your next trip to Japan and to experience Yashiro's dream, the dream of the twentieth century, for it also expresses new potential for the twenty-first century of Japanese scholarship on East Asian art: that it should transcend the closed and domestic framework in which art history takes place according to national borders and instead encourage an East-West dialogue and a dialogue among the regions of Asia.

As we reflect on the practice of Asian art history in the twenty-first century, what can we learn from Yashiro's achievements in the twentieth century? Among Japanese art historians of the twentieth century, perhaps no one pondered his own identity more assiduously than Yashiro. First as a Japanese student in Europe, then as a specialist of Western art in Japan, and finally as a researcher of East Asian art with a background in Western art, he never felt that he possessed a stable identity. But this ambiguity of identity itself proved to be eye-opening, enabling him to formulate an unbiased view of the art that came out of a language, religion, and ethnicity that were foreign to him.

In the atomized and overspecialized field of art historical studies in Japan, it would appear that Asian art never comes into focus as such. Perhaps, paradoxically, we can recover an awareness of it by allowing a little more ambiguity back into the field. This is exactly what Yashiro's broad-ranging scholarship seems to be inviting us to do.

1. Yashiro Yukio, *Watashi no bijutsu henreki* [My Odyssey in the Fine Arts] (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1972).

2. Yashiro Yukio, *Nihon bijutsu no tokushitsu* [Characteristics of Japanese Art], 2nd ed. (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1965).



ASIAN ART HISTORY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Edited by Vishakha N. Desai

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
Williamstown, Massachusetts

Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London